ART AND POETRY AS THE BASIS OF MORAL EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON JOHN STUART MILL’S VIEW, WITH APPLICATION TO ADVERTISING AND MEDIA ARTS TODAY

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John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is known for his ethical work, *Utilitarianism* and his political work, *On Liberty*. From the beginning of Mill’s career to the end, we can find constant references to the importance of art and poetry in nurturing the moral sentiments. Here I will lay out some of Mill’s ideas on the importance of art and poetry in developing moral sentiments and habits of association, and make some application of these views of Mill to advertising and media today. If Mill is right that moral sentiments such as social sympathy require the moral training and nurture of poetry, literature, and other art forms, and if advertising and media have largely taken on the roles which poetry and art used to play in the 1800s, then advertising and media play a central role in the development of our moral conceptions of the good, the excellent, and that which is worthy of pursuit.

It is widely known that Mill was raised by his father James Mill and their family’s close friend, Jeremy Bentham, the famous Secular Utilitarian, to be a prototype Utilitarian — well educated, logical, focused on the reasonableness of pursuing the greatest happiness for the greatest number in a stoic fashion. But it is also well known that, while he learned Greek and Latin by age five and edited many of Bentham’s works in his teens, in his late teens he had a mental breakdown of sorts. What brought him out of this severe mental anguish was reading some short stories and poetry which helped him feel sympathy towards characters in the book. This had a huge impact on Mill’s thought on moral teaching. While Bentham and his father has instilled the intellectual understanding of utilitarianism in young John, what he had indeed been lacking was the moral motivation provided through narrative stories, art, and poetry. Mill says in his autobiography,
I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the individual for speculation and for action. I had now learnt by experience that the passive susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as the active capacities, and required to be nourished and enriched as well as guided. I did not, for an instant, lose sight of, or undervalue, that part of the truth which I had seen before; I never turned recreant to intellectual culture, or ceased to consider the power and practice of analysis as an essential condition both of individual and of social improvement. But I thought that it had consequences which required to be corrected, by joining other kinds of cultivation with it. . . . The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed. And my thoughts and inclinations turned in an increasing degree towards whatever seemed capable of being instrumental to that object. I now began to find meaning in the things which I had read or heard about the importance of poetry and art as instruments of human culture.1

Through art and poetry, Mill hoped, one could cultivate a balance between intellectual culture or analysis, and the cultivation of feelings, sentiments, and whatever other instruments might serve the ends of bringing about social feeling.2

The real difference between Mill and Bentham’s more crass utilitarianism, then, was that Mill made a distinction between higher and lower pleasures, and thought that society would be much better off if we preserved and nurtured the higher capacities in citizens, particularly through art and poetry. One of my favorite quotes from Mill, which I share with every class I can is the following:

Capacity for the nobler feeling is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. . . . Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because
they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower, . . . (John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* 2.7.15)

For Mill the higher capacities were:

A. Intellect: literacy, reasoning, getting jokes, creative thoughts
B. Imagination: new ideas, problem solving, artistic novelty
C. Moral Feelings: love, kindness, charity, sympathy
D. Noble Sentiments: courage, heroism, pride in one’s work

Mill believed these sentiments were affected by the art, poetry and literature which one read. They could be awoken by the right poetry, for example.

It is interesting to see what Mill thinks will undermine these higher capacities — it turns out that one of the most damaging is myopic business behavior. In his later works, Mill maintained his instrumentalist view of media and the arts. In his 1867 Inaugural Address at St. Andrew’s University, Mill claims that the lack of cultivation of the sentiments among the British, in contrast to their continental counterparts, was due to two things primarily:

It may be traced to the two influences which have chiefly shaped the British character since the days of the Stuarts: commercial money-getting business, and religious Puritanism. Business, demanding the whole of the faculties, and whether pursued from duty or the love of gain, regarding as a loss of time whatever does not conduce directly to the end; Puritanism, which looking upon every feeling of human nature, except fear and reverence for God, as a snare, if not as partaking of sin, looked coldly, if not disapprovingly, on the cultivation of the sentiments.  

According to Mill, there are then two important factors which have held back the British in cultivating their sentiments. First, business values replace the moral and aesthetic values of the individual. One chooses money-making efficiency over beauty or ethics. Second, regressive Puritanism which represses the emotions. He goes on to say, “Different
causes have produced different effects in the Continental nations; among whom it is even now observable that virtue and goodness are generally for the most part an affair of the sentiments, while with us they are almost exclusively an affair of duty.”

Mill contrasts the man controlled by conscience, or duty, and the man who is guided by sentiments. He claims that those controlled by conscience are primarily guided to not do particular things, while the man guided by sentiments is guided also to do certain things. But of these two types Mill says, “It is of no use to debate which of these two states of mind is the best, or rather the least bad. It is quite possible to cultivate the conscience and the sentiments too.” In fact, Mill thinks that cultivating conscience is done as we cultivate sentiments of justice, etc., and consciousness reciprocally helps sanction and establish habits of association. The training of sentiments is not only possible, but necessary for proper moral education. He says,

Nothing hinders us from so training a man that he will not, even for a disinterested purpose, violate the moral law, and also feeding and encouraging those high feelings, on which we mainly rely for lifting men above low and sordid objects, and giving them a higher conception of what constitutes success in life. If we wish men to practice virtue, it is worth while trying to make them love virtue, and feel it an object in itself, and not a tax paid for leave to pursue other objects.

Mill’s goal is to help people develop feelings of love for virtue. Part of this educational process will be the encouragement of the desires for higher pleasures. The inner sanctions of conscience in the form, for example, of having negative feelings towards immoral acts, and positive feelings about justice and nobleness, will provide a powerful basis for moral behavior. Mill wants to educate and direct not only people’s knowledge, but their feelings, and help establish associations between right action and nobility, or an idea of something larger than ourselves, as well as associations between wrong action and smallness and degradation:

It is worth training them to feel, not only actual wrong or actual meanness, but the absence of noble aims and endeavours, as not merely blameable but also degrading; to have a feeling of the miserable smallness of mere self in the face of this great Universe, of the collective mass of our fellow creatures, in
the face of past history and of the indefinite future — the poor-
ness and insignificance of human life if it is to be all spent in
making things comfortable for ourselves and our kind, and rais-
ing ourselves and them a step or two on the social ladder. Thus
feeling, we learn to respect ourselves only so far as we feel
capable of nobler objects: and if unfortunately those by whom
we are surrounded do not share our aspirations, perhaps disap-
prove the conduct to which we are prompted by them — to
sustain ourselves by the ideal sympathy of the great characters
in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an
idealized posterity: shall I add, of ideal perfection embodied in
a Divine Being?7

Having habitual ideals of sympathy in heroes of history helps us to with-
stand the moral laziness or disapproval of others, as well as providing us
with a sober assessment of our own place in the universe. Dwelling on
great heroes or even things Divine can help. As a means of cultivating
these moral sentiments, Mill advises poetry as an inspirational tool:

Now, of this elevated tone of mind the great source of
inspiration is poetry, and all literature so far as it is poetical and
artistic. We may imbibe exalted feelings from Plato, or Demos-
thenes, or Tacitus, but it is in so far as those great men are not
solely philosophers or orators or historians, but poets and art-
ists . . . Its power is as great in calming the soul as in elevating it
— in fostering the milder emotions, as the more exalted. It
brings home to us all those aspects of life which take hold of
our nature on its unselfish side, and lead us to identify our joy
and grief with the good or ill of the system of which we form a
part; and all those solemn or pensive feelings, which, without
having any direct application to conduct, incline us to take life
seriously, and predispose us to the reception of anything which
comes before us in the shape of duty.8

But after suggesting Wordsworth, Lucretius, Gray and Shelly, Mill
goes on to say that “I have spoken of poetry, but all the other modes of
art produce similar effects in their degree. . . . All the arts of expression
tend to keep alive and in activity the feelings they express.”9 For Mill,
there is an important causal relation between moral and aesthetic excel-
ance:
There is, besides, a natural affinity between goodness and the cultivations of the Beautiful, when it is real cultivation, and not a mere unguided instinct. He who has learnt what beauty is, if he be of a virtuous character, will desire to realize it in his own life — will keep before himself a type of perfect beauty in human character, to light his attempts at self-culture.\textsuperscript{10}

Like Plato’s view of art, Mill claims that art produces the ideals — the perfect models for us — and this is why art is defined by Mill as “the endeavour after perfection in execution.”\textsuperscript{11} This is why becoming knowledgeable and educated in art then helps us to become more excellent morally:

Art, when really cultivated, and not just merely practised empirically, maintains, what it first gave the conception of, an ideal Beauty, to be eternally aimed at, though surpassing what can be actually attained; and by this idea it trains us never to be completely satisfied with imperfection in what we ourselves do and are: to idealize, as much as possible, every work we do, and most of all, our own characters and lives.\textsuperscript{12}

So this is Mill’s view of art — that it is to be encouraged and pursued, because it produces in us moral sentiments and moral excellence. These sentiments are not merely feelings, but ideas and associations which bring us to expect excellence and to have a particular vision of oneself and the world. Ryan puts it well in the following:

Mill’s concern with self-development and moral progress is a strand in his philosophy to which almost everything else is subordinate. And this is why, once we have established the rational society, scientifically understood, controlled according to utilitarian principles, the goals we aim at transcend these, and can only be described as the freely pursued life of personal nobility — the establishment of the life of the individual as a \textit{work of art}.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{APPLICATION}

For Mill, poetry’s most important power was the ability for it to sustain and nourish the essential social sympathies which would provoke the appropriate moral inspiration in their readers. Mill saw poetry and litera-
ture to be valuable insofar as they inspired people with social sympathies and high moral feelings. The poet-philosopher is really the one who can write good poetry — poetry which directs the person towards social sympathy and a harmonious life where he feels that following the utilitarian principle is an integral part of his world view.

I believe Mill’s views are quite applicable to our culture today. But in today’s culture, art and poetry and literature take radically different forms. A likely source of much of today’s poetry is either MTV songs, or advertisements. The art most people are exposed to comes in cinematic or television form, or else it is provided through glossy catalogues and magazines which help foster particular notions of the good, the valuable, and the beautiful. Vogue or the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogues, for example, provide our Venus de Milos of today. GQ and Survivor provide us with our version of those Greek heroes from Homer’s writings. Steven King and others provide us with literature — but what values are being promoted is unclear.

Most of the art, poetry and literature which we are exposed to today is paid for by someone to get us to want to purchase a product. Art, of course, has always been for purposes — in medieval times only the Church could afford to pay artists to produce works to support and sustain its view of the world for its parishioners. In the Renaissance, merchants began to privately fund art which was for personal pleasure. But today, most of the media art which dominates our lives is sponsored by a corporation.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. What it means is that those who produce this art have a moral responsibility. If Mill is right that art and poetry and literature do play a radically important role in nurturing social sympathy, moral imagination, and ethical sentiments in general, then whoever produces art has some role to play, and so, some responsibility, in nurturing capacities for higher sentiments. Insofar as advertisements and mainstream media undermine those capacities, they undermine the real basis of moral behavior, according to Mill.

**Advertising as Educator**

Advertising socializes individuals in a way that roughly resembles education, providing them with ideas, images, and examples of cultural expectations. It must be as guilty as any other kind of social agency if it can be proved that we are learning the wrong things.
As a reflection of popular culture, advertising imitates the base elements of everyday life, duplicates the monotonous and bland, copies the dullest aspects that can appear in the mass media as well as in everyday life. Yet advertising is not only a follower of weak trends and mediocre tastes. It can teach. It can provide useful information. It can actually enhance people’s lives.  

Advertising does educate, insofar as it informs our worldview, our expectations, and also insofar as it helps us develop particular habits and desires — feelings about what is good or not so good, what is desirable and what is not desirable, and even feelings about what is morally acceptable and what is not. Like an educator, advertising is not a dictator, or a supreme being which can always enforce its will on the masses. It must also be responsive. But insofar as it does affect us and direct us, it is a source of education and influence. If one thinks of advertisement as mere entertainment, it is difficult to think of it as having moral responsibility. But when one begins to think of advertising as an educator, one will begin to hold it accountable. What is advertising teaching us? How is it directing our sentiments and desires? What sorts of models of living is it putting before us, and how do those ideals affect our moral attitudes and behaviors? Those are important questions, and questions which cannot be answered here, but they point us toward a conclusion, namely, that if advertising is an educator, informing our world view and directing our desires and affections, then it does play an important role in influencing our morals, and so, advertising has a moral responsibility insofar as it has a civic responsibility.

The fact is, advertising gives us our heroes. Sports stars, rock stars, and movie stars are used to sell us goods, and insofar as they do, they are set up as the spokespeople of our culture — the prophets of our time who give direction to us. They reveal the truth to us, helping us to know how to live and act. One turns to them to find out the gospel of what is acceptable, hip, and good. But these heroes quite often direct us toward material goods as our salvation. It is naive to think that these heroes don’t affect our ideals, hopes, and values. Mill says that the inspiring lives of the characters he read about when young were especially influential upon his ideals. In his autobiography he says,
Long before I had enlarged in any considerable degree, the basis of my intellectual creed, I had obtained in the natural course of my mental progress, poetic culture of the most valuable kind, by means of reverential admiration for the lives and characters of heroic persons; especially the heroes of philosophy. The same inspiring effect which so many of the benefactors of mankind have left on record that they had experienced from Plutarch’s *Lives*, was produced on me by Plato’s pictures of Socrates, and by modern biographies, above all by Condorcet’s *Life of Turgot*, a book well calculated to rouse the best sort of enthusiasm, since it contains one of the wisest and noblest of lives, delineated by one of the wisest and noblest of men. The heroic virtue of these glorious representatives of the opinions with which I sympathized deeply affected me, and I perpetually recurred to them as others do a favorite poet, when needing to be carried up into the more elevated regions of feeling and thought.16

Books were the main media of Mill’s day, and these books played a very influential role in forming his ideals of what was worth pursuing. Advertising is the media of our day. Poetry has no chance in comparison with the powerful penetration of advertising into our lives. Unfortunately, the education and direction which receive from advertisements, and the virtues which are extolled in ads are suspect at best.

**CONCLUSION ON PERSUASIVE ADVERTISING: WHY WANT ADS ARE NOT SEXY**

Want ads are generally not a passionately persuasive form of media expression. When I advertise an old refrigerator in the paper, I use the want ads. Want ads are straightforward — not much rhetoric or hype, and primarily facts. Furthermore, want ads are not pervasive. They do not show up in elementary textbooks, they aren’t put on billboards, nor are they interspersed throughout my favorite TV program. Want ads do not associate products with scantily clad women or promises of divine happiness. Want ads generally have no particular aesthetic content — visual, musical, or otherwise (apart from, perhaps, the bold face printing) — which gets us interested on the coattails of our other natural desires.

On the other hand, television and magazine ads use more rhetoric, can tap into our emotions, and generally permeate our consciousness in a
way which simple want ads do not. This is because sophisticated advertisements are affecting us not only with straightforward information, but they are affecting us emotionally and influencing our conceptions of happiness and wholeness. The content is only part of what I am sold on. The form of the advertisement is really what draws us in. Insofar as one is drawn in by content, one is drawn in by the possibilities of the product, not the product in and of itself — the promise of the product is what captures our imagination. One is presented with new possibilities to want, new possibilities to need. In so presenting these possibilities, advertisements are the means by which the boundaries or horizons of my wants and needs are altered. These effects of advertising are certainly world-changing, because they alter the context within which I see myself in relation to the outside world. What is more, advertising affects my standing in the world even if I refuse to pay attention to it, insofar as it affects the context and background within which others see me. For example, I may decide that purchasing a new car is not necessary or prudent since my old car works fine, but my standing in the eyes of others may be affected indirectly by advertising insofar as other people's ideas of success or other positive associations may have been successfully affected by advertising in the particular ways which I myself resisted. This is why advertising's effects permeate our world whether or not one directly listens to the call of the advertisers ourselves.

It is likely that most of the immoral actions committed today (at Enron, Worldcom, to one's spouse, against one's customer, against that person in the blue car on the bypass) are done not because we lack a knowledge of what is right and wrong. Most of these actions are committed because we have lost our moral imagination and social sympathy. These, like a tender plant, have been crushed by want and neglect — not only due to the incredibly busy lives we lead which leave us no time to cultivate our higher sentiments, but as Mill says, because we have addicted ourselves to crass empty desires which are usually self-centered and non-social.

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NOTES


2 Sharpless makes an interesting claim about a slight but important change in the way in which Mill considered poetry valuable. He says that, “Unable to synthesize thought and feeling by logical means, Mill, in later years, more and more frequently judges literature on the basis of the degree to which its content or meaning contributes to social progress. But with an important difference: now these ideas are judged on the basis not of their truth, but their utility. They are valued not absolutely but pragmatically on the basis of their contribution to the same social and moral objectives.” (Sharpless, p. 169).


5 Mill, “Inaugural Address”, p. 192.


14 Berman, Advertising and Social Change, p. 32.


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